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Ford Is An Amateur

Woodrow Wilson, who spent his time at the Paris conference after World War I talking grandly about global peace while the pragmatic European leaders divided up the spoils, was described sadly by one contemporary as "a virgin trapped in a brothel, calling sturdily for a glass of lemonade."

Some of that same flavor of being out of the real action now pervades the Ford Administration. Wilson's problem was idealism, and few would accuse President Ford of having an overabundance of that quality, but there is an unmistakable similarity in the inexperience and ineffective approach to tough and unpleasant problems.

The presidency is no place for amateurs.

President Ford simply does not give the impression that he really knows what he is doing. For months, he wasted endless days in traveling around the country, making speeches in which he said so little of value that eventually reporters stopped writing down what he said. He announces policies and makes statements — and then nothing happens.

Even his tendency to be accident-prone adds to the picture of a man not quite in control. His latest bump on the head in a swimming pool follows a series of incidents in which he has slipped and fallen or bumped his head on something.

Ford's abrupt cabinet shuffle, the awkward way in which it was handled, and his lack of candor in explaining the changes have produced a sharply negative reaction both at home and abroad. The President seems to be panicking, surrounding himself with a loyal crowd of old cronies from Congress or Michigan who may be jovial on the golf course but who are not equipped to provide him with a broad range of options and opinions.

"I call him Nixon's revenge," one observer noted sourly.

Ford's selections of George Bush to head the troubled Central Intelligence Agency and Donald Rumsfeld to lead the Defense Department have not increased confidence in the administration. Bush's partisan background as former Republican party chief is bad enough. But there is also the amateur problem again.

Bush has held important-sounding jobs, at the United Nations and as the first U.S. representative in China. But they have all been basically public relations tasks, involving more ceremonial duties than policy-making or administration. Similarly, Rumsfeld sounds good on paper but has had scant experience making tough major decisions (if you believe the President when he insists he alone decides the big ones, not his staff). The importance of being ambassador to NATO, Rumsfeld's job before he came to the White House, can be seen in the fact it was offered to CIA Director William Colby when he was fired — and Colby turned it down.

There is a very real danger that the intelligence community will blithely return to its old ways and simply ignore its new chief, who has had no background in the area at all. That is what the CIA bureaucracy did to Adm. William Raborn, whom President Lyndon Johnson named to head the agency in 1965. Raborn was an outsider and the professional spies resisted him so effectively he was out within a year, to be replaced by a longtime professional, Richard Helms.

Rumsfeld is equally ill-prepared to cope with the high-powered plotting of the big defense contractors and the military establishment. Searching for reasons why he appointed Rumsfeld, the President explained lamely that he had "served in the Department of Defense as a naval aviator." Every man who was ever a second lieutenant will find that really reassuring.